

The Picture

Cadrilla nodded, her eyes still glinting with amusement, and not admonishing me at all for my presumption in speaking unbidden. ‘So each company is much the same, Tria, and we know all of the other drivers, merchants and guards by sight if not by name.’ Another grin at me. ‘First timers stand out.’

‘Oh.’ That included me! So much for being inconspicuous! I glanced uneasily round. So how many other people were noticing me? I tried scrunching my shoulders to make myself smaller.

Our visit to the leatherworker should have been brief, for Cadrilla was being as brusque and confident as any woman ever can be when shopping.

‘A simple carrying bag, lad,’ she informed the lanky young journeyman there, a brown-haired lad with a straggly adolescent beard of the sort that is best shaved off. ‘It need not be new made, but must be in good condition... and with a wide shoulder strap.’

A what? I got it. A wide strap would not chafe my shoulder. If possible I warmed to Cadrilla even more for her thoughtfulness.

‘We have these three, lady...’

As befitted my station I was standing behind Cadrilla, and had no part in the haggling, nor choice in the purchase, save to carry the bag she chose. Instead I carefully scanned the market place for any sign of anyone paying me overmuch attention, then, reassured, shifted my gaze to the leatherwork on display...

Then I saw it, and my mouth dropped open, and I stared in amazement and awe. In the front of the workshop was a piece of thick, polished leather embossed with a portrait. I fear I am explaining this poorly. That face was so lifelike I half expected it to wink an eye at me. What was more, it was plainly the face of the craftsman who owned this workshop and was busy serving other customers.

‘Wake up!’

I jerked back to reality. Cadrilla was holding out a bag. I would have trembled at her scowl if her eyes had not been sparkling with humour.

‘Your pardon, my lady,’ I apologised, ducking deep, and taking the bag.

‘You were daydreaming,’ she scolded me, but softly.

‘Tis the picture, my lady.’

‘What picture?’

I pointed. She also gaped.

‘By the Skygods, that is good!’ she exclaimed. She turned to the lad. ‘Who did that, the craftsman?’

The lad flushed. ‘It was me, actually.’

‘You’re a good artist, lad...’ she glanced at me. ‘Don’t you agree?’

‘Tis more than good, my lady,’ I agreed, still fascinated by the picture. For some reason it made

me think of Bellandes, and of faces I had seen conjured there by the Illusionist Dorvilla... *Oh! So perhaps this lad is more than a simple artist?* I bowed deep to the lad.

The lad flushed more. 'Thank you, my lady... and you, girl.'

The lad was smiling at me. I looked down and blushed. Tis uncommon for a slave to get thanked.

The lad was watching us as we left. I cast one last glance at the portrait. I jumped. I would have sworn it had winked one eye and smiled at me! I peered closely at the young leatherworker. He was innocently gazing skywards now, his lips pursed in a whistle, but not quite managing to completely hide his own smile.

Oh, I thought, perhaps I am not the only one here in disguise?

There was something strangely comforting about that.

As I carried the shopping around for Cadrilla in my new bag, I kept a keen eye out for people watching me, and also for sight of Adrell and Dorrak, and, indeed, I did see them in the distance, seated drinking ale outside our inn, and I knew that they had seen me in turn. I so yearned to trot across to them, and hug them and chat to them, but I was playing the slave, and Cadrilla could know naught of our company. I managed a small smile and a discrete wave, but that that was all.